Christian Century Event

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FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

There is an appropriate irony about our being here together this evening and the keynote speaker not being here.

When we decided that we should hold an event like this to honor Jim Wall and to introduce a new Editor/Publisher, it seemed appropriate that both he and I should be present. We're both busy, but that wasn't too difficult. Then someone said "but Marty has to be there too." Well, what followed was one of those tortuous comparative calendar obstacle courses. Jim and Marty could—I couldn't and Marty and I could, Jim couldn't. Mostly, however, it was Marty. After giving serious consideration to holding the event in a passenger lounge at O'Hare, we finally found the one date in 1999 that the three of us could be at the same place at the same time, and imagine our absolute delight when the Reverend Jesse Jackson agreed to be our speaker and was available on April 30 as well.

So, here we are, and he isn't. And yet, how very consistent with what this magazine has been about for more than a century, that our speaker is where he is, doing what he is trying to do: faith intersecting with human life at its most real, most intense, most tragic, most human.

I also wish to confess that while I'm disappointed that he is not here, I am thrilled that David Wilhelm, former Chairperson of the Democratic National Committee, distinguished political consultant, *Christian Century* Board member, is. That's like getting Sammy Sosa instead of Mark McGuire. McGuire hit a few more out, but Sosa was everybody's Most Valuable Player.

In a life of change, very few things are constant. Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today, tomorrow. My wife and family, Opening Day every April. In a professional ministry that began in 1963 very few things are constant and one of them has been and is *The Christian Century.*

What a delight to discover in the early 60's. Someone at the University of Chicago handed me a copy one day—"here—read this." It was an editorial about Civil Rights, I recall. And I recall my response—Wow! They are my kind of people. I didn't know I had friends like that. I didn't know there was a magazine and a community of readers out there who wanted to read about theology and politics and art and movies and books.

And so I was hooked and I don't believe I have been without the fortnightly—as we used to call it—shot of theological, cultural, biblical, artistic adrenaline ever since.

It was more important than I can say—to have that resource and the knowledge of that community of readers out there. Century was my support system as we lived through Hattiesburg and Selma. In 1968, when the high hopes of the New Frontier began to As a young pastor in a blue collar community in the Calumet in the 1960's, the Christian dissolve, and not a one of us didn't find himself/herself wondering if we were in the wrong business, the Century kept telling me that what I was doing mattered, that the issues were critical, that faith mattered, that the Christian community has a word that must be said in the marketplace of ideas.

Week after week, I was blessed, stimulated, provoked, sometimes angered, often made to laugh, with the consistent reminder that religion belongs in the intersection of American life and global life.

And so I am profoundly grateful to be standing here this evening, now a part of this wonderful enterprise.

I'm grateful to Jim McClure and the Board, to Bob Krogh and the search committee for their courage in making an unlikely choice.

And let me share a vignette. To the great chagrin of everybody I know and to my own personal embarrassment, I am not computer literate. I use a pen and a legal pad and the telephone, those rude implements of our quickly disappearing past. The Dallas Morning News did a nice piece on the Century and Jim Wall and began by saying that Buchanan is an unlikely choice to be the new Editor/Publisher. My daughter, who lives in Dallas was surprised to see my face staring out at her from the morning paper and at the breakfast table said, "Listen to what they are saying about Granddaddy . . .Buchanan is an unlikely choice . . ." And 11 year old Caitlin looked up from her Cheerios and said, "Why? Because he doesn't know how to use a computer?"

In any event, for the courage to make an unlikely choice, I am grateful.

But mostly this evening, I'm grateful for Jim Wall. He has been my mentor and teacher regularly across the years. When the Century arrived I always looked first to see what he had to say and what topic he wanted me to think about. He even persuaded me to read about obscure Latvian motion pictures which I would never have known about let alone paid good money to see. By the way, Jim, one of the reasons preachers read you is that we are always vacuuming for sermon material. And I have never gotten a single vignette or usable quote from your periodic reviews of Latvian movies.

Marty says about Wall—me quoting Marty about Wall is a little like Tinkers to Evers to Chance, don't you think?--Marty says Wall lives in a world where God is active but often in disguise, and where signs of the spirit are waiting to erupt from novels, movie screens and bully pulpits.

It is the honor of my life to follow this distinguished man, this faithful Christian, thoughtful, articulate, courageous man of faith.

He leaves behind a magazine in good shape, financially sound insofar as I have been able to determine, mainly because he never spent a penny on anything, and best of all, a marvelous staff of committed professionals. And very best of all, he will continue to write, contributing a bi-weekly column.

I love getting on the bus or in a cab and going to my new office. If truth be told, every preacher wonders what it is like to get your briefcase and hop in a cab and go to your office in the loop. We spend our life wondering what we're missing. So I love going to my new job. I love what I do when I get there, which is reading and watching other people work.

But let me tell you what I don't like about this business—Letters to the Editor.

It's a little different from what happens to the preacher on Sunday morning. Church people are universally polite, considerate, compassionate, and well trained. They know that what you say after church is "good morning, I enjoyed your sermon." We know that mostly they don't really mean it, but we like it and it makes us feel good and useful and loved.

So, can you imagine when I opened my first letter and someone in St. Louis told me he was disappointed--that my ideas were wrong--that I wasn't fit for the job—that people like me shouldn't be allowed in print—that God was just waiting to put things straight—not only for my dullness, but for my magazine's decades of apostasy and heresy and treason. The next day there were three more.

One guy took me on for saying I didn't want to talk about a name change now. "Just because the founders of the Christian Century had no ethnocentric vision is no reason for their successors to have no vision at all." And worst of all, this is not just private. Sometimes we print them and 25,000 people read about what an incompetent the editor is.

So come on Sunday morning—tell me you enjoyed my sermon!

The future—

We're going to sit down together this fall and talk about that, but let me, in a few brief sentences, tell you what I think and hope for.

A continuation of the tradition of a public conversation about faith and life, conducted in the intersections, by a wide diversity of thinkers and scholars and writers and public figures.

A continuation of advocacy for justice and integrity and faithfulness around issues that are not simple, nor easy: critical for the life of the nation and world, like racism, the gap between rich and poor, interest and debt, public education, health care, violence, human rights, guns, sexuality.

An openness to new modes of communication even though I don't use them yet, and

A sensitivity to the new market of readers which will be our future. No, we won't turn it into that gaudy new style adopted by everyone and which makes me crazy with its sound byte clutter about this and that. We will continue to print substantive think pieces that engage the mind and spirit as well as the eyes.

We must have young readers. We must have non-clergy readers.

And we will think about ways our magazine can be a resource to churches that are committed to education, to faith seeking understanding.

**I want to thank Lydia Talbot and the committee
who made the arrangements for this evening.**

Gratitude to Ed Bergstraesser and the good people at First United for hosting us, and my colleague on the staff of *The Century.*

Carl Sandburg said of the time just before Abe Lincoln was first elected, that something was dying, something was being born and nothing would ever be the same.

Something of the same is happening at the end of a millennium in the world and our nation and the church, or, as the prophet Isaiah put it: "Behold I am doing a new thing." *The Christian Century* will be, with your support and prayers, an important part of whatever new reality emerges in the days ahead.

Again, thank you for being here—and pray for us, support us, most of all, renew your subscription, send one to your children, pastor and friends. At $40 per year it's still the best bargain around.